

Pentecost 15, September 5, 2021 (Mk 7:24-37; Is 35:4-7a; Ps 146; Js 2:1-17)

When Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German in 1521, he first put the small book of James at the end. All the other books were in the same order we have now—but after Revelation, there were several blank pages.

Only then did Luther allow James to appear. Later on, when the Lutheran translation was actually printed (on the newly-invented Gutenberg printing press)—then he relented and placed James back in its original setting, right after Hebrews.

Luther's reasoning was that James, in the very text we read today, unites *faith* and *works* seemingly without distinction. Luther feared people would continue to believe what the Roman Catholic Church had always taught: that they could *earn* their way into heaven by doing good deeds.

We Lutherans know we're saved by grace through faith, apart from any works of the law. -- You know that, right? Repeat after me: we're saved by grace (repeat) through faith (repeat) apart from any works of the law (repeat).

Luther's whole catechism is built around this, teaching and reminding us that only *God* can save us. In no way can we save ourselves.

What James really meant, of course, is that *if we have faith, it will be obvious through our works, or deeds*. **Faith active in love** is how Luther put it; and it's as true today as it was in the sixteenth century—or indeed, at the time of Christ.

James was probably the brother of Jesus, and his brief letter has much to teach us. The theme of today's text is, we may *think* we have faith, but if we're not acting in love, then **we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us**. Only God knows if we truly love our neighbor as ourselves.

That's something we've been taught from little on: love one another, be nice to each other, don't hurt anyone, bear one another's burdens, share what you have.

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We don't do those things in order to win God's favor—we do them, and other kindnesses and mercies, because God has first shown kindness and mercy to us.

Hold that thought, and let's look at today's gospel from Mark. In both of the stories, Jesus is interacting in ways that defy his good Jewish upbringing. He's breaking all sorts of social, religious, and cultural taboos.

Jesus is in gentile—non-Jewish—territory. He's gone there, it seems, to have some time off, an *escape* from the intense ministry he's been doing. In scene one, he's in a gentile house, and there he's sought out by a gentile woman.

Notice the emphasis on *gentile*. Three times in three verses Mark stresses how *un-jewish* the woman is. It was a social, cultural, religious taboo to cross over the gentile/Jew boundary. Yet she'd heard of Jesus' power to heal, and she'd come to beg healing for her demon-possessed daughter.

But Jesus is on a mission: to convert the Jews from their perverted religion back to the true worship of Israel's God. He's healed many people, many *outcasts*, so far in his ministry, but they've all been Jewish. It was the *Jews* he'd come to save.

Because the woman is a gentile, not a Jew, Jesus denies her request for help. *I'm here for the Jews, and it's wrong to give dogs what belongs to God's children.*

But this foreign woman has such strong faith in his power, Jesus finally does what she asks: he casts the demon out of her daughter, long-distance. And he *praises* this gentile for her belief in him.

In the second story Jesus heals another outcast, this time a man with physical impairments. Remember, any person who wasn't whole was considered unclean, believed to be a terrible sinner; that's why God punished him with his disability. (We know today this is untrue. Jesus himself explains that in John's gospel.)

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The man is deaf and has trouble speaking. Jesus takes him aside to work his healing miracle. After putting his fingers in the man's ears, he spits and touches his tongue, and says, **Ephphatha**, *be opened*. The man's tongue is freed, and he speaks plainly.

Both healings in today's text deal with social and religious outcasts. Neither the gentile woman nor the deaf man had anything at all going for them until they met Jesus. Only through the miracle of healing could they be brought back within the fold of polite society, of acceptance in their culture.

Like them, we come before Jesus with nothing at all to offer except what he has first given us. We're covered with the dirty rags of self-seeking, self-serving self-centeredness. Our broken relationships, our impatience, our intolerance keep us from deserving the healing we need. Our obvious guilts and our secret shames keep us from receiving true forgiveness.

We know we're imperfect and unworthy. That knowledge keeps us from being able to receive the very grace that alone can bring us into God's holy presence, where we can find true salvation.

But there's Jesus, reaching out to toss us not only the crumbs from God's table, but his own body and blood, so we can enter into eternal life with him both now and forevermore.

There's Jesus, who puts his fingers in our ears and says, **Ephphatha**, *be opened*, so we can hear in our hearts his words of love, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.

There's Jesus, who frees our tongues to sing his praises, to glorify God in heaven, and to share the good news with the whole world.

Thanks be to God!